

Hidden Persuaders

The Mindless Eating That Adds Pounds

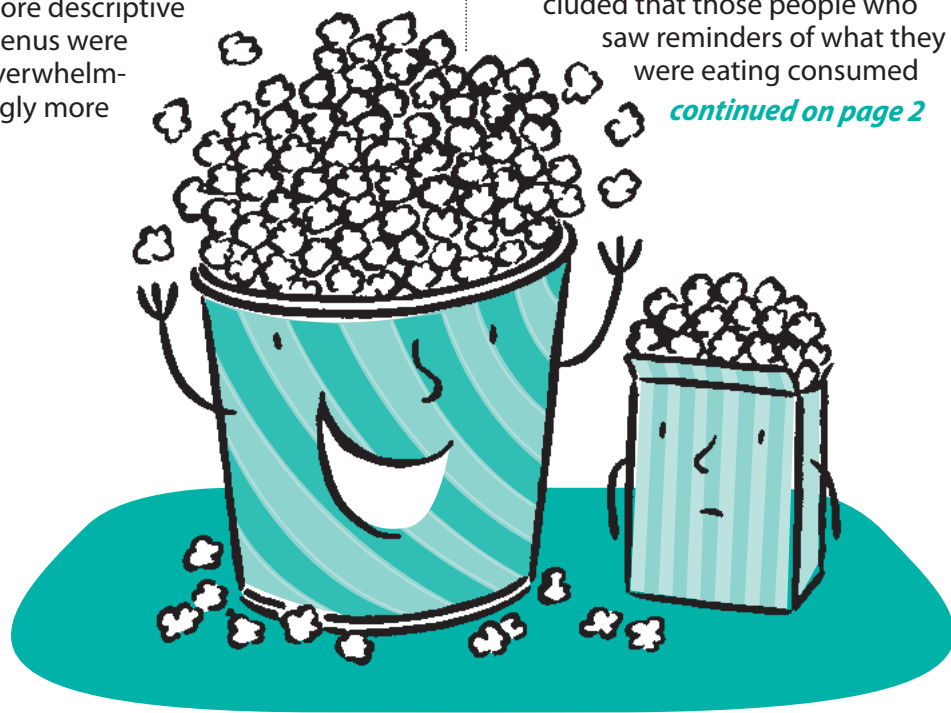
People seem to gain weight easily but have a hard time taking it off. Americans are continuing to get heavier, increasing the risk of getting Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer and various other health conditions. Healthy eating can play an important role in helping you avoid excess weight. It can also increase the quality and length of your life. Interesting new research is revealing that part of the reason why it's so difficult to eat healthy is that "hidden persuaders" can lead you to eat more than you think you're eating.

Dr. Brian Wansink, director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab, reviewed the latest research into these hidden persuaders in a recent talk at NIH. For example, the size and shape of containers, he said, can as much as double the amount of food you consume. In a field study at a Philadelphia movie theater, researchers gave participants free popcorn in large or extra large sizes. Unknown to the participants, they were randomly given popcorn that was either fresh or 10 days old. The researchers found that people eating from the extra-large popcorn containers ate 45-50% more than those eating from the large ones. Participants even ate 40-45% more stale popcorn when it was served in bigger containers.

Food descriptions affect your food intake as well. Wansink described how researchers were able to help a cafeteria boost its business. Using creative terms that appeal to the senses, "seafood filet" and "chocolate cake" became "succulent Italian seafood filet," and "Belgium black forest double chocolate cake" on the menu. People making selections from these more descriptive menus were overwhelmingly more

one study, students at a Super Bowl party in a restaurant were given free all-you-can-eat chicken wings. Plates were busied from some of the tables while bones were left to pile high on others. Those whose plates were not busied ate less. Participants from the busied tables seemed to have a harder time judging how much food they were eating. The researchers concluded that those people who saw reminders of what they were eating consumed

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enthusiastic about the food they received. Those making their selections from non-descriptive menus were mostly disappointed. Research shows that this common advertising technique, called descriptive labeling, not only attracts customers to selected menu items, but also causes them to eat more.

Losing track of how much you're eating also leads you to eat more. In



Statistics

In 2005, 65% of adult Americans are overweight or obese, and 16% of American children are overweight.

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Wise Choices

Tips to Avoid Mindless Eating:

- **Be aware of the size and shape of containers.** It's the amount of food that counts, not what it looks like.
- **Serve food on smaller plates and bowls.** Empty plates and bowls cue some people to stop eating.
- **Use nutrition labels, paying attention to the serving size listed.** Consider the facts; don't guess at how many calories you're eating.
- **Look past the packaging.** A food's package or the language on a menu can lead you to actually like a food better, increasing your chance of overeating.
- **Keep visual reminders of how much you're eating.** Keep wrappers, empty containers, bones and other reminders of how much you've eaten nearby.
- **Think about eating a healthier meal.** Don't just focus on separate parts of the meal.
- **Control your purchases.** Don't let signs lead you to buy more than you need.

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less in the end. This conclusion was confirmed by another study showing that people wound up eating less candy when they saw their empty wrappers pile up as they ate.

Another interesting finding Wansink described is that healthier food doesn't always lead to healthier eating. Most people know that olive oil is a healthier fat than butter, but it's not healthier if you eat a lot more of it. Researchers gave a group of diners at an Italian restaurant either butter or olive oil with their bread. Those

with the olive oil consumed an average of 16% more fat with each slice of bread. However, they did eat 19% less bread. Wansink stressed the importance of focusing not only on the targeted food but also on the companion foods. Think about eating a healthier meal rather than focusing on separate parts of the meal.

Eating healthy begins with what you buy in the first place. Wansink explained that we are highly influenced by quantities listed in signs. Our minds tend to anchor on the



Portion Distortion:

<http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/portion/>

Aim for a Healthy Weight:

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt/index.htm

Weight-control Information Network:

win.niddk.nih.gov/

numbers that are suggested to us, and we then adjust our purchase from there. That's why signs often list items like "3 for \$3.00" rather than just saying "\$1.00 each." These signs can end up as much as doubling how much we buy, because we tend to focus only on what to buy when we go shopping, not how much to buy. If you bring home more food than you need, you'll be tempted to eat more.

"By encouraging healthy, mindful eating, we can decrease obesity," Wansink said. A keen awareness of all these hidden persuaders is an important step in controlling the amount and quality of food you eat. ■



Questions

for dining out

Can you please:

- remove the bread basket?
- serve fat-free (skim) milk rather than whole milk or cream?
- trim visible fat from poultry or meat?
- leave all butter, gravy or sauces off a dish?
- serve salad dressing on the side?
- accommodate special requests?
- use less cooking oil when cooking?

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Preventing Childhood Obesity

New Tools to Promote Healthy Habits

More than twice as many children are overweight now than three decades ago. The problem with being overweight is more than just size; it puts kids at risk for developing chronic illnesses like heart disease, diabetes, and asthma. All parents want their child to be as healthy as possible, but many wonder where to start. A new national education program called **We Can!**—**W**ays to **E**nhance **C**hildren's **A**ctivities and **N**utrition—provides guidance for parents, caregivers, teachers and others who want to help children ages 8-13 maintain a healthy weight.

Research shows that kids are eating too much food that's high in calories and low in nutritional value. They're also spending too much time with television and computers and not enough time moving around. The science-based **We Can!** program is a one-stop resource for parents who want to make healthier choices for their families.

The program focuses on three key behaviors that families can work on together: healthy eating, increasing physical activity and reducing recreational "screen time"—time spent watching TV or playing video games or computer games. Making small, easy changes over time—like serving fresh fruit for snacks, replacing regular sodas with water, fat-free or low-fat milk, and taking a walk after dinner instead of turning on the TV—can make a difference in a child's health.

We Can! helps guide food choices, too, by categorizing items into "go" foods that can be eaten almost anytime, "slow" foods that can be eaten at most several times per week, and "whoa" foods that are meant for eating once in a while or on special occasions.

The **We Can!** program is a collaboration between 4 NIH components: the National Heart, Lung, and Blood



Institute, the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and the National Cancer Institute. The resources available include a parents' handbook in Spanish or English as well as a tool kit with lesson plans for parents and children.

The parent handbook, *Families Finding the Balance*, provides realistic tips for adopting healthy habits and making those behaviors stick. It helps parents teach their children to:

- Eat a sufficient amount and variety of fruits and vegetables per day;
- Choose small portions at home and at restaurants;
- Eat fewer high-fat and energy-dense foods that are low in nutrient value such as french fries,

bacon, and doughnuts;

- Get at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week;

- Reduce recreational screen time to no more than two hours per day.

"It's all about energy in and energy out," says Dr. Elizabeth G. Nabel, director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. "To maintain a healthy weight, we need to strike a balance between the amount and types of food we eat, and the energy we burn up with activity."

NIH director Dr. Elias Zerhouni says, "Our research shows that the main driver of whether or not you become obese later in life depends on how you were raised and the habits you acquire when you're a child. That is why it is so important to intervene early."

The **We Can!** program is designed so that parents or any local civic groups, parent groups, religious groups or other organizations can use the information to begin addressing the problem of overweight children in their community. Organizations such as parks and recreation departments, health departments, and hospitals and health systems in more than 35 communities across the country are already using the lessons and activities to encourage healthy nutrition and physical activity.

Visit the web site at <http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov> or order materials by calling toll-free 866-35-WE CAN (866-359-3226). ■



wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov

Health Capsules

Shingles Vaccine Promising

An experimental vaccine for shingles—a painful nerve and skin infection—cut the number of shingles cases in half in one of the largest **clinical trials** of an adult vaccine ever. The vaccine also dramatically reduced the severity and complications in people who got the disease.

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is caused by the same **virus** that causes chickenpox. Once chickenpox infection runs its course, some of the virus lingers in **sensory nerve cells**, usually near the spinal cord, where the virus stays dormant for years. As **immunity** weakens with advancing age, the virus can reactivate, multiply and damage the nerve cells to cause pain. It then migrates to the skin, where it causes pain, itching or tingling before turning into a painful blistering rash that can take two to four weeks to heal. A serious complication of shingles is postherpetic neuralgia (PHN)—a form of chronic nerve pain that lasts for 3 months or longer. Nearly one-third of older people with shingles experience PHN.

The study, which was led by the Department of Veterans Affairs and carried out in collaboration with

NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and Merck & Co., Inc., involved more than 38,500 men and women age 60 or older. The vaccine used in the study is a new, more potent version of the vaccine that has been used to prevent chickenpox in children since 1995. Half of the participants received a single injection of the vaccine (a live, weakened form of the virus) and the other received a **placebo** vaccine.

During an average of more than three years of follow-up, the vaccine reduced the incidence of shingles by 51 percent; 642 cases of shingles occurred among those in the placebo group compared with only 315 in the vaccinated group. In addition, the pain and discomfort in those who got shingles was 61 percent lower in those who had gotten the vaccine. The vaccine also reduced the incidence of PHN by two-thirds compared with placebo.

This is the first time that a vaccine has proven effective against shingles. Merck has already submitted a license application to the Food and Drug Administration for the vaccine. The research team estimates

the vaccine could potentially prevent 250,000 cases of shingles in the U.S. each year and significantly reduce the severity in another 250,000. ■



Definitions

Clinical Trials

Research studies with human volunteers that aim to answer specific health questions.

Immunity

Your body's ability to protect itself from bacteria, viruses, molds and other harmful substances.

Placebo

Harmless substitute with no effect, used to compare how well an experimental treatment works.

Sensory Nerve Cells

Cells that receive and interpret sensations, like pain.

Virus

A disease-causing germ so small it can't be seen with a regular microscope.



Featured Web Site

Weight-control Information Network

win.niddk.nih.gov

Science-based information on obesity, physical activity and weight control for health professionals and the public. From NIH's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.



www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/shingles/shingles.htm
nihseniorhealth.gov/shingles/toc.html

Pack Healthy Ideas for Summer Trips

Whether you're planning a long drive across the country or a weekend getaway with family and friends, don't let healthy eating take a back seat. You can eat well while on the go this summer. Just think before you eat.

When choosing foods and snacks for your trip, avoid the chips and sodas, and pack a small cooler with healthier items that are easy to eat in the car like fresh fruit, cut-up raw vegetables and bottled water. Also pack some dried fruit, nuts and seeds.

Whenever possible, build physical activity into your travel plans. Physical activity may help you and your family and friends manage the demands of travel by promoting a sense of well-being and reducing feelings of anxiety.

For more information about healthy eating and physical activity, call NIH's Weight-control Information Network (WIN) at 1-877-946-4627 or visit <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/>. ■